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ABSTRACT

Ireland's economic and social problems in the 1980s spawned a new kind of community education. Key characteristics of the new community education are as follows: (1) it is a learning environment and located in the community; (2) it provides learning programs based on identified needs; (3) its control remains in the local community's hands; (4) its teaching and learning methodologies are rooted in emancipatory, humanistic values; (5) it maintains that people are capable of reaching their potential through growth and development; (6) participants' own experience is valued as the basis for learning; and (7) its intended outcomes are personal acquisition of skills, knowledge, and further directions and social and community empowerment and advancement. The processes involved in community education are underpinned by a philosophy of active participation. Ireland's recent rapid, profound social and structural changes and economic prosperity have simultaneously created skill shortages and new forms of poverty and social exclusion. Specific policy recommendations related to the following areas have been formulated to enable local community and voluntary organizations realize their full potential in addressing these issues: (1) recognition; (2) resources (funding, human resources, premises, accreditation, professionalization of community education services, support services); (3) and local, regional, and national representation. (Contains 13 references.) (MN)

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AONTAS POLICY SERIES

ED 468 936

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

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AONTAS

AONTAS POLICY SERIES 1

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

AONTAS is the Irish National Association of Adult Education, a voluntary membership organisation. It exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education that is accessible to and inclusive of all.

AONTAS Mission Statement

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INTRODUCTION

In the thirty years since its foundation, AONTAS has witnessed, supported and participated in the multifaceted attempts of organisations, communities and individuals to create in Ireland the conditions necessary to make Lifelong Learning available to all. As a membership organisation, AONTAS has seen many changes during those thirty years. When it was first founded in 1969, its membership predominantly consisted of Vocational Education Committees which were the main providers of Adult Education as well as other groups involved or interested in Adult Education such as church groups, schools, rural groups, libraries. As the Adult Education sector grew, so too did the number and range of groups which became involved in provision. The appointment of Adult Education Organisers in 1979 was a key development for Adult Education as was the growth of the literacy movement in the eighties. The eighties also saw the birth of locally based Adult Education groups, which added a new dimension to Adult Education provision.

Typically these groups were initiated by one or two key individuals, usually women, sometimes with the support of local statutory or church officials, sometimes alone. They were small, made up of ten to twenty members, relying on local fundraising or small once-off grants, spending much of their time on the constant search for sufficient funds to maintain their survival. Many of them, though not all were women's groups although their voluntary management was undertaken mostly by women and many of their service users were women. This was hardly surprising given the many structural and economic barriers faced by women who wished to return to education, training or the workforce. However these groups also provided many other services to their communities especially within communities which suffered from disadvantage and poverty.

The eighties also brought escalating unemployment and increased levels of poverty and social exclusion to many communities in Ireland. The resulting social problems which beset people living in these communities increasingly called for collective rather than purely individual responses. The bulk of the work involved in tackling the consequences of poverty, unemployment and isolation was undertaken by women who themselves were experiencing the worst effects of these problems. While these locally based groups engaged in a range of activities to support their communities, educational programmes were key to the success and development of their work.

The structures, programmes and activities of these groups were rooted in the day to day experiences, interests and needs of Irish adults, particularly those who were disadvantaged economically, socially and educationally as they struggled to direct their lives in the face of growing unemployment, poverty and marginalisation. Thus was born a new kind of Community Education.

DEFINING COMMUNITY EDUCATION

This new development was spearheaded by women who were encouraged to raise their expectations, strengthen their confidence, increase their skills and bridge the gap between personal and community life. These community based groups developed a locally based infrastructure which facilitated the empowerment of women to begin to identify and address issues of poverty, social exclusion, inequality and unemployment both for themselves and for their communities. These successful models of education and development have in recent years been incorporated into many other community based training opportunities which recognise that the development of the individual through a group process can lead to collective action. They have also acted as agents of social change at local level.

The changes and developments in the external environment have been reflected in the membership of AONTAS and, indeed, in the direction of its work especially in recent years. Since 1996, there has been an increase of sixty nine per cent (69%) in membership from the Community and Voluntary sector, which now comprises two thirds of its total group membership. This has given rise to many new developments within the organisation, as it responds to the needs of its members. For example the funding accessed through the Community Initiative, New Opportunities for Women (N.O.W.), and more recently the Women's Education Initiative (WEI) allowed AONTAS to respond to the needs of the women's community groups, while the publication of the first ever Green Paper on Adult Education in 1998 "**Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning**" gave a focus for debate and discussion on policy objectives, decision-making and representational structures. AONTAS is currently engaged in an important piece of research into the barriers to education and training which exist for marginalised men and has already discovered a wealth of developing, community based activity in this area of work.

AONTAS welcomed the recognition of Community Education in the Green Paper and during its consultation process sought the views of all its members from both the Statutory and Voluntary sectors on its development. It also welcomed the Ministerial appointment of a representative with knowledge of the Community and Voluntary Sector on the new National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, a development in which AONTAS played a key role with its partners in the Community and Voluntary Accreditation Forum(CVAF). Despite these initiatives, however, the Community Education sector is still working in a policy vacuum without the structures, personnel or resources to develop models of best practice and transferability. Investment in capacity building at local level is essential to ensuring the development of a sustainable Community Education Sector. This document is designed to

provide a framework for debate and discussion on the development, support and representation of Community Education, and to make policy recommendations based on the knowledge and experience gained by AONTAS through working and consulting with its member groups from the sector.

One of the things which has hindered the growth and development of Community Education has been a lack of understanding of what it is actually about. The Green Paper offered two definitions which are fundamentally different in their philosophies and approaches. On the one hand Community Education is defined as a system of provision within the community by a range of institutions including schools, training agencies, universities, churches and others who make their premises and resources available to the local community. On the other hand Community Education is defined in terms of a particular approach or process, which is rooted in the community and growing from it. As a result of the work engaged in by the organisation in developing the sector to date, AONTAS attributes the following definition to Community Education:

> *Community Education is a process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community and of the community, reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation within the community. It is distinct from general Adult Education provision, due both to its ethos and to the methodologies it employs.*

Community Education and Development

Part of the problem of understanding the concept of Community Education as defined above is the lack of clarity of the boundaries between it and Community Development. Community Education and Development have strong coinciding underpinning philosophies and expected outcomes. However the notion of Community Education as delivered to the community within the overall Adult Education and Training context can obscure these core coincidences. The learning from the women's Community Education movement has shown that Community Education has a distinct set of characteristics. These characteristics make the approach to education and development quite different to traditional Adult Education

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and training. The difference is that Community Education enables the participants to emerge with considerably more than personal skills. Rather, they emerge with critical thinking skills, combined with the capacity for collective action.

The key characteristics of Community Education are:

- It is a learning environment
- It is located in the community
- It provides learning programmes based on identified needs
- The control remains in the hands of the local community
- The teaching and learning methodologies are rooted in emancipatory, humanistic values
- It maintains that people are capable of reaching their potential, through growth and development
- Participants' own experience is valued as the basis for learning
- The intended outcomes are twofold but interconnected:-
  - personal acquisition of skills, knowledge and further directions
  - social and community empowerment and advancement.

The setting and substance of Community Education, in the cultural action model of working with marginalised groups and communities, equates it with Community Development, in the adoption of objectives that lead to empowerment.

(Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning, 1998)

Community Development

Community Development has had various threads linking it to community empowerment over the years. In its current role as part of the anti-poverty strategy, it has taken on new significance as a force for social change. The work that Community Action Network (CAN) and the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) has done to capture some of the complexities of Community Development shows the underlying philosophy to be identical to that of Community Education. In this, it has a clear view of the person, and how people can grow and become empowered though collective action.

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CAN's definition is:

> *Community Development aims to encourage people to take control of their own lives, to develop fully their human potential and to promote community empowerment. It involves people coming together in groups to identify their collective needs and to develop programmes to meet these needs. The process or the way in which the work is carried out is as important as the programme of development being undertaken. The process of Community Development stresses the need to develop community awareness, engender group cohesiveness, and to promote self-reliance and collective action. This logically leads communities to seek changes at policy and institutional levels, often highlighting the need for the redistribution of society's resources.*
>
> *(Kelleher and Whelan, 1992)*

The key points in the CAN definition of Community Development show that it is premised on a perspective that human beings are capable of development to their full potential, and that this can be harnessed to bring about the development of the potential of the community. CAN's definition includes the notion of agency, that people can take control of their own lives, and overcome the restrictions and constraints of social structures and institutions, changing them in the process. It looks at the way in which this is achieved, highlighting the need for people to own the process, rather than have it imposed from the outside. Community Education is one of the principal mechanisms used in Community Development to achieve these outcomes.

The co-incidence of Community Development and Community Education is such that they overlap like two intersecting stars. They have the same core values; they form a coherent whole, but they lead to outcomes beyond themselves. In the case of community development, the overall outcome is the transformation of society, to include marginalised groups and individuals and encompass diversity and difference. In the case of Community Education, the overall outcomes include the provision of the skills to enable people to bring about the transformation of society, but also to link in with the provision of qualifications, further education, and economic engagement. Those who are engaged in Community Education see it as a tool for the overall development of communities as well as individuals.

Many of the groups engaged in Community Education are not perceived as part of the Adult Education sector by the Department of Education and Science because of their broader role in Community Development and their anti-poverty focus, nor do they fit easily into the standard definitions of Adult Education. Funding for community groups has come mainly from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs because of this anti-poverty focus, thus obscuring their important educational interventions for those who are hardest to reach. This ability to attract the most marginalised back into education is a key feature in their success and a powerful argument for supporting them, and for recognising them as the first rung on the ladder of progression.

Community Education in Practice

Community Education is Adult Education which is located physically in the community, whether the community is geographic or issues based. It adopts a person centred approach which is very different from the approach which centres all the power, knowledge and status in the teacher.

Community Education responds to the needs of the community and decisions on its contents and process are made by and for the very community who avail of it. The aim of many courses or programmes is to enable people to analyse and challenge their position in society.

The processes involved in the practice of Community Education are underpinned by a philosophy of active participation:

- Courses are provided in response to local needs and use local skills wherever possible
- The variety of provision encourages movement from individual needs to skills-development for active engagement with the family, the community and the labour market
- Learning is motivated by personal enrichment which may or may not lead to engagement with the labour-market, depending on the wishes of the participant
- Learning is designed as a stepping-stone to other forms of learning, aimed particularly at those who have had negative experiences of education in the past
- Programmes take account of where the learner is at and values his/her experiences
- An emphasis is placed on awareness raising and confidence building as a mechanism for the development of individual progression pathways.

This model has proven itself to be particularly successful in attracting participants who may never have taken the opportunity to re-enter educational opportunities otherwise. Its value was cited in the Green Paper on Adult Education, particularly in relation to the success of locally based women's groups. This is not co-incidental. Community Education recognises the barriers to learning which exist for individuals and attempts to eliminate them in as far as is possible. The provision of support services, such as childcare, course materials, access to computer facilities and the support of a facilitator are crucial factors in encouraging adults back into learning. The use of teaching and learning methodologies which recognise and respect the adult learner at whatever stage of development s/he is, is a key factor in the success of community based education initiatives in attracting 'hard to reach' participants.

Community Education has a considerable impact on a personal and collective level. Participants have the opportunity to share experiences which can lead to an appreciation of common issues and a recognition of the social structures that are oppressive. From this social space participants in Community Education are encouraged to gain confidence to move out into the public world of work, community involvement and further education.

Qualitative outcomes at a personal level from Community Education include:-

- confidence and self-esteem
- motivation
- increased expectations
- skills
- choice
- new opportunities

and at a collective level:

- mutual support
- opportunities to experience influence and decision making
- ability to organise for personal and group development
- tackling community issues

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Outcomes such as these can eventually lead to social change. This type of social change can transform a society to one where people suffering the effects of poverty and disadvantage have an equal share in the benefits of society. This is of the utmost importance at the moment in Ireland as we become an increasingly wealthy, but an increasingly divided and individualistic society.

The role of Community Education in Civil Society

As with many advanced western societies, Ireland is experiencing rapid and profound social and structural changes. Among these changes are the globalisation of the economy, the extraordinarily rapid developments in information and communications technology and changes in family and social structures. The so-called Celtic Tiger has brought unprecedented economic growth, bringing unemployment down to its lowest ever levels and, for the first time in the history of the State, Ireland is faced with skills shortages.

Our country is being lauded as the success story of Europe but, despite such prosperity, it is becoming increasingly evident that serious economic and social divisions exist. The existence of such divisions is incompatible with active and equal citizenship. The cohesion of society and consequently its stability, are at risk if people are unable to participate in the economic and social development of that society. The government Green Paper, published by the Department of Social Welfare in 1997 entitled **"Supporting Voluntary Activity"** identified new forms of poverty and social exclusion. The examples it quoted were homelessness, the marginalisation of young people from mainstream institutions and the subsequent increase in crime. An additional and new problem is the growth of racism as Ireland struggles to deal with a rapid influx of people with different ethnic and cultural origins..

All of these issues have an impact on local communities and education plays a key role in addressing them. However the solution to these problems requires imaginative and flexible approaches which can draw on the collective strengths of communities, which in turn must be resourced and supported in this task.

Active citizenship began to be fostered by Government Departments as a way of involving geographic communities in planning and development initiatives at local level. Community representatives were appointed to local structures – most notably the Local Development Partnerships. This is being expanded as new initiatives come into force at local level, for example, in the new structures for Local Government outlined by the Department of the

Environment and Local Government, and in the Local Adult Learning Boards currently under discussion in the wake of the Green Paper on Adult Education.

The functions and limitations of Community & Voluntary Organisations

While local communities have the potential to play a key role in addressing civil society issues, and indeed, already perform important functions in this regard, they also have limitations.

In terms of the functions and limitations of Community and Voluntary Organisations, a research report by the European Foundation entitled **"Active Citizenship & Community Involvement, Getting to the Roots"**, defined elements which have consistently appeared in AONTAS reports and other Community and Voluntary sector documentation.

Functions included activities such as:

- Organising mutual aid.
- Providing social and recreational activities.
- Carrying out, or campaigning for improvements to the locality.
- Liaising with the authorities on behalf of residents
- Providing information, advice or assistance on a particular social issue such as health, education or employment.
- Providing local communications such as a community newspaper or radio stations

It also identified low profile but crucial social functions such as:

- Enabling people to make friends and overcome isolation.
- Providing personal support to people in distress.
- Spreading information about local developments and opportunities.
- Enabling people to develop new skills by taking on tasks for the group.

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Such functions have education at their core, hence the need for provision which is rooted within the community, and which is designed to produce a rapid response to issues and problems. Local groups in endeavouring to respond through Community Education approaches have, however faced a number of problems:-

- Their role was often not widely understood, either by citizens or authorities.
- They were often held back by lack of funding or policy support.
- Many groups were too small to reach a significant number of those in need of their services, were working on a "shoestring" budget and were not widely known.

"Community", as an entity, is also beginning to be viewed in a different way. We no longer define community in a strictly spatial manner, but rather attribute qualities of the collective to our definitions. Community may now represent a collective of women, older people, people with disabilities, travellers or of residents in a particular area. All of these "communities" have a common goal or purpose, issues and strategies for change within a broader geographical context.

Community Education plays an important role in the promotion of active citizenship as well as providing an important access point for the most marginalised. Local groups allow people to grow and develop within an environment of common purpose and collective empowerment, enhancing their personal skills and life experiences while contributing to the local skills economy. In the emerging new structures for Adult Education and in the context of the new and welcome investment by the Government in this vital area, it is important that the role of Community Education is recognised, and that its work is supported through investment of financial and human resources.

AONTAS is making the following recommendations for its development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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RECOGNITION

The role of local communities in the development of their own education must be recognised as a legitimate and important part of the jigsaw that makes up Lifelong Learning. In particular, the role of women as key development agents in their own right must be recognised and supported. Recognition of the role of Community Education as an essential tool in the development of communities as well as individuals is of the utmost importance.

Resources must be made available to research and document the work being done in the sector with a view to making it more visible and understood by policy and decision makers.

Models of best practice from within the sector should be evaluated with a view to integrating them into mainstream programmes of Adult Education and Training.

Where appropriate, designated centres of Community Education should be recognised and supported by the Department of Education and Science.

Appropriate funding should be available to community based groups for provision of programmes, development of their group's educational role and for capacity building in relation to assessment and evaluation procedures.

Further recognition should also see Community Education taking on a new role as a full partner in education, and having access to the same fora, decision-making and financing structures as those providers operating within the formal sector.

RESOURCES

Funding

Funding for Community Education has been diverse and at times piecemeal. Many groups provide Community Education as a primary function of their activities, accessing funding from a variety of sources which have included:

- European Structural Funds including the Community Initiatives N.O.W., Horizon and Integra, all of which have an employment focus.
- Peace and Reconciliation funds designed to enhance cross-border co-operation.
- Programme of Funding to Community Development and Family Support Services by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs which has an anti-poverty focus.

- Department of Education and Science funding for Adult Education through the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES) and Special Intiative for Disadvantaged Adults Scheme (SPIDAS).

Community Education operates at a number of levels, therefore funding must be made available in a way which will promote sustainable growth. This implies a variety of funding mechanisms, including starter funding, core funding and long term funding, with access to institutional links which ensure a co-ordinated programme of support. Funding programmes also need to include specific budgets for childcare and other ancillary supports.

Currently the majority of community based groups are funded by the Departmental of Social, Community and Family Affairs due to the anti-poverty focus of their work. While groups are generally satisfied with these funding arrangements they regard their education programmes as a very important means of achieving both individual and collective development, and as a progression route into mainstream education and training. Such educational programmes should be funded by the Department of Education and Science, both directly and through the new Local Adult Learning Boards on the basis of their area development plans.

Human resources

Community Education Resource Workers should be employed as part of the new emerging structures for Adult Education. Their functions should include supporting the local Community Education providers to address their funding, accreditation, policy, information and other needs.

An additional priority should be to assist groups in building partnerships with key agencies in their areas with a view to establishing a coherent, integrated and accessible system of education and training for adults. These employees should be supported by a technical assistance unit at national level.

Premises

Community Education providers have found it notoriously difficult to find premises. In its research entitled **"Liberating Learning"**, in 1991, AONTAS found most of the premises used were costly, usually sub-standard, often dangerous and unsuited to the needs of user-groups. Insurance was difficult if not impossible to obtain in the absence of a permanent address or an unusually compliant landlord. A review of the research in 1996 indicated that little had improved.

AONTAS recommends that existing publicly owned buildings should be made available for the provision of local education initiatives and support services, without charge and with adequate insurance cover.

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Community Education providers should have access to capital budgetary lines to ensure that suitable premises can be made available at local level.

The proposal to develop educational multiplexes should be further developed and Community Education providers should be entitled to full use of the facilities for the delivery of their programmes and the provision of support services.

Accreditation

The Community Education sector has seen difficult times in relation to accreditation of its programmes and processes. Much of this difficulty stems from the fact that policy makers who have had little personal or professional experience of the sector find its ethos and practices difficult to deal with. Such practice does not fit logically with the formal systems of accreditation, and often seem loose and difficult to evaluate.

This is beginning to change as the concept of Lifelong Learning, with its focus on the provision of education in a multiplicity of settings and based on the recognition of wide-ranging modes of intelligence, gains credence.

The publication of the recent **Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999** has the potential to progress the development of accreditation systems for Community Education in that:-

- It recognises the centrality of the learner within the education process, a practice upon which Community Education has been based.
- It recognises that educational opportunities can be gained outside formal settings.
- It highlights the need to recognise multiple intelligences and to accredit accordingly.
- It guarantees the right of learners to access, transfer and progression routes within and between the formal and non-formal sectors.
- It understands that a provider can be anyone or anywhere, once quality of provision can be assured.
- It makes the development of systems of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and Credit Transfer and Accumulation (CATS) a priority for the new National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.
- A representative of the Community and Voluntary sector has been appointed by the Minister for Education and Science to the Board of the new National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

However, in order to take maximum advantage of these developments some preparatory work needs to be done to enable the sector to develop.

Under the auspices of the National Qualifications Authority, mechanisms should be established for dialogue between mainstream providers and the Community and Voluntary Sector.

An informal network of community based education groups, the Community and Voluntary Accreditation Forum (CVAF) has already been working on the issue of accreditation of programmes within the Sector and has made submissions to Teastas. The group has also published research entitled **"Towards an Integrated Accreditation Framework"**, in 1999, which examined the practices and standards of five Practictioner Learning Programmes (PLPs) within the Community and Voluntary Sector.

CVAF has the potential to be developed and resourced to consult with its member groups, to provide feedback to and support the work of the Ministerial appointee from the Community and Voluntary Sector.

Resources should also be made available to local groups through local structures, to enable them to work with appropriate agencies towards developing accreditation for community based learning programmes.

Such resources should include:

- requisite funding for the development of programmes
- employment of accreditation advisors at Local Adult Learning Board level
- employment of an accreditation specialist at National Adult Learning Council level
- funding for the development of support structures and facilities to meet quality assurance requirements under the terms of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999
- adequate information on accreditation practices and standards and other supports as identified locally

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Professionalisation of the Service

Volunteers have played a key role in the management, provision and delivery of Community Education for many years. During that time many of these volunteers have gained a wide range of experience, expertise and informal qualifications in their fields of work. Their past and current contribution must be valued and supported in a newly professionalised sector.

Many groups rely on community-based training agencies for their certification. The issue of recognition of such qualifications must be addressed by the new NQAI.

Professional training programmes must take account of previous qualifications and/or the experiential base from which community based workers come, and be designed to meet their particular needs.

Of particular importance is the issue of parity of esteem between the Statutory and Voluntary sector with regard to professional qualifications. A partnership approach would ensure that Community Education would retain its richness and flexibility while assuring the quality of the service.

Support services

Consultations with Community Education providers showed that expansion of services cannot be achieved without appropriate spending on ancillary supports. Of particular importance is the provision of adequate, affordable and accessible childcare as an integral part of funded programmes and not as an add-on. The most recent learning from the Women's Education Initiative (WEI) has shown once more that where such facilities are provided, those most in need can participate in learning opportunities. This was illustrated powerfully at the final WEI conference by a young woman who estimated she would need to wait twelve years before returning to education because she was the parent of three children at different stages of education, unless flexible childcare facilities were put in place.

Adults wishing to return to learning also need support in terms of educational information and guidance. The recent Pilot Initiative funded by the Department of Education is an important first step in this regard. However in order to provide the widest possible range of support it must include resources to enable community based groups to develop models of good practice in the same way as it has supported statutory bodies. This is particularly important in the light of the role of community based projects in reaching non traditional adult learners.

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Other supports required by community based learners include study supports and in the case of participants in rural areas, access to transport facilities. The particular needs of people with disabilities and other special learning needs must also be taken into account and resourced in ways which allow adult learners to access further education and training.

REPRESENTATION

The Green Paper on Adult Education stimulated a high level of debate in relation to representation of the Community Education sector on the formal structures which will be established as a result of the anticipated White Paper. These include the Local Adult Learning Boards, the National Adult Learning Council, the Forum for Practitioners and other structures which may emerge. Other structures of importance include the National Qualifications Authority Ireland (NQAI), Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) as well as fora such as the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning, the Community Platform and Pillar. The 1997 DSW Green Paper on Voluntary Activity also identified representation as a complex issue for the Voluntary and Community sector.

The problems relating to the recognition of the Community Education sector have led to difficulties in appointments to decision-making and representative structures. Many of the difficulties stem from the fact that the Community and Voluntary Sector is far from being homogeneous and contains a broad range of organisations from large charitable organisations to small voluntary groups. While the Community Pillar has made huge advances in bringing social and economic issues to the table at a national level, it does not represent all aspects of the sector nor has it developed transparent mechanisms for ensuring representation across a range of policy issues. This is emerging as an issue of concern as Government Departments are increasingly using the Pillar as a nomination route to policy making bodies.

Of particular concern to AONTAS is representation of the interests of community based groups engaged in the provision of Adult Education, a broad range of whom are its members. AONTAS believes that the sector, through the publication of the Green Paper, has been finally given the level of recognition required to afford it the right to adequate representation in the future. However, there are still issues to be addressed with regard to the method of selection/election of representatives given the disparate nature of the sector and the fact that very few structures exist at local level to facilitate representation.

While the absence of representative structures at local level has led to a lack of cohesiveness within the Community and Voluntary sector, lack of awareness by the State Agencies of the barriers facing the sector has equally contributed to its lack of representation.

Such barriers include:-

- Lack of representational and analysis skills
- Lack of access to information, research and documentation
- Lack of recognition of the work and caring responsibilities of volunteers which make it difficult for them to participate

AONTAS believes that representation for the Community Education sector should operate at three levels in order to function effectively.

Local Level

At local level resources need to be put in place to build the capacity of community education groups to enable them to build Community Education Platforms which would in turn develop transparent mechanisms for the selection of representatives from this sector.

AONTAS has recommended in its response to the Green Paper on Adult Education, **"Making an Impact"**, that Local Adult Learning Boards employ Community Resource Workers to capacity build with the local groups. Some community organisations have already developed effective models of representation e.g Women's Networks, while in some areas Partnership companies have supported the development of Community Platforms, to enable the broad community sector to participate actively in the structures of their local area, and to engage fully and actively with the work of the Partnership Company.

These Platforms are also used for the election of Community representatives onto the Boards of the Partnerships concerned. Such models work well and could be developed as a mechanism for representation on the new Local Adult Learning Boards as well as Local Government Structures.

Regional Level

At a regional level there is a necessity to provide a support structure which will assist Community Education groups and workers through training, information sharing and networking to develop sustainable regional infrastructures which will ensure that issues

which affect them are addressed. This infrastructure would also facilitate the development of a partnership approach to establishing links between Community Education Networks and key agencies with a view to influencing policy. Building partnerships between Community Education Networks, the workplace and Education and Training agencies will be crucial to the development of progression routes and to integrated accreditation frameworks. The Women's Education Networks Development Initiative (WENDI) project undertaken by AONTAS in support of its Women's Networks is a good model of such a support structure.

National Level

At National level it is of the utmost importance that the interests of Community Education groups are represented on the structures mentioned earlier. As the National Association for Adult Education with a large number of Community and Voluntary groups in its memberships, AONTAS is in a position to represent the needs of this sector on the National Adult Learning Council (NALC), the Taskforce for Lifelong Learning, the NQAI and other relevant bodies in its own right. This is particularly important in the light of the current use by some Government Departments of the Community Pillar as a nomination route. The issue of representation at National Level through the Community Pillar must be addressed as a matter of urgency and transparent mechanisms put in place to ensure that all aspects of Community and Voluntary activity are represented.

Conclusion

The forthcoming developments as a result of the two White Papers will present an unprecedented opportunity to develop and support the work carried out by local volunteers and groups in their communities , and to use their energy and creativity in a way which will provide non traditional adult learners with a real opportunity to participate fully in all aspects of community life.

They will also present an opportunity to develop real and sustainable partnerships between Voluntary and Statutory education providers, thus opening up progression routes and establishing a varied range of Adult Education provision which takes account of multiple learning styles and stages of development. This document has been published with a view to developing an understanding of Community Education and the key role it plays in providing access for non traditional learners. We hope that it will serve as a focus for debate and discussion on how to build an integrated Adult Education Service which makes the most effective use of the resources currently available.

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